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Ægyptiaca intercede for Margaret, who has only once forgotten herself, and scarcely knew that she was sinning.

But the chorus celebrates the endless longing of Love as the one all-developing and saving power. That which is of the earth in woman draws us often downward, but that which is eternal in woman,

“The woman-soul leadeth us upward and on.”

THE ORIENTALISM OF PLATO.

BY S. S. HEBBERD.

The object of this paper is to elucidate a principle the neglect of which has brought no little confusion into the study of civilization and philosophy. That principle, briefly stated, is that there are always certain great thinkers who are not to be regarded so much as representatives of the civilization surrounding them, as protestants against it. They oppose the ruling tendency of their race or age: they invert its thought: they swim, as it were, against that special current which sweeps the national life resistlessly onward. This principle, seemingly so simple, has been, as we have said, strangely neglected by the historians of civilization and philosophy. Authors who wish to describe a national life, attempt to make an impossible synthesis of all that is within that life. They sum up, for instance, what is to be found in Pythagoras and Aristotle; they weave together, as well as they can, the conflicting tendencies of Homer and Plato—and call the product a representation of the Grecian spirit. Hence comes that variance which every attentive student must have noticed between the different estimates of even a civilization so well known as that of Greece. Out of a conflicting mass of elements that thwart and neutralize each other, one writer emphasizes one element; another its very opposite; and so we have as many estimates as there are conflicting tendencies in the civilization which is being described.

To exemplify all this we shall take the single case of Plato.

We shall attempt to show the real relation which the great philosopher held towards the surrounding civilization. We shall present him as a protestant against the ruling spirit of his race—as one drawing his inspiration from a different source and steadfastly opposing those special impulses which constitute the very essence of Grecian life. To do so, it is necessary, first of all, to understand what those special and ruling impulses really were.

The root of pure Hellenism is its steadfast, unconquerable determination to glorify the human. Even its theology is based upon that idea. The chief Olympian divinities are not, as those of the Orient are, mere personifications of the forces of Nature. They are not incarnations or emanations of abstract being clothed for a moment in the illusory forms of earth; they are a race of immortal and invisible heroes endowed with every essential characteristic of human nature. They are even characterized—so determined was the Greek to make his gods like himself—by human finiteness: They all have finite attributes: they are not omniscient, but know much; they are not almighty, although they have great power; they are not omnipresent, but can move from place to place with an almost inconceivable rapidity. Their moral finiteness is still more clearly marked; they are sensual, jealous, meddlesome, even untruthful and malignant. Every essential element, good or bad, in human nature, finds its prototype in the Greek Olympus.

Human nature, then, is divine. Closely connected with this proud conception, was an invincible faith in human freedom. The Oriental, glorifying nature and despising humanity, is necessarily a fatalist; to him, man is but an insignificant atom in the all-pervading system, bound by the same conditions and subject to the same necessity which is imposed upon all created life. The Greek, on the other hand, reverencing himself more than the Universe, did not believe that he was thus bound. It is true that in the Homeric poetry a vague conception of fate is sometimes presented; but that is a fading vestige of an older, ruder form of thought, before the Greek had learned to fully assert his faith in human nature. And even when the idea of fate is thus infrequently and vaguely recalled, it is never an absolute necessity like that of the Orient; it is a fate somehow conditioned by the energies of man; its decrees are often modified or even entirely reversed by other agencies. By a man's own free person-

ality—that is the final, essential outcome of the Homeric doctrine—his character is formed, and upon that lies the burden of responsibility. This idea of moral freedom was brought out more and more clearly in the advance of Hellenic civilization. Fatalistic conceptions may sometimes be presented by the philosophers; they may even lie obscurely in the background of the popular belief, as the dim vestiges of pre-Hellenic thought; but the poetry, the art, the religion, the public and private spirit of the Grecian people, are all animated by an unconquerable faith in the moral freedom of man.

The third essential element of the Greek spirit was its intense materialism. And here we shall be met by a swift dissent from those who will be reminded of Pythagoras and Plato and the mystical school at Alexandria. But let it be remembered that the question here is not concerning the doctrines of a few speculative thinkers in Greece, but concerning the ruling impulse and tendencies of the entire Grecian civilization. We see the civilization of India constantly overmastered by a sense of the spiritual, disdainful of the present, engrossed with the things of futurity, reposing always an unshaken faith in unseen and intangible realities: there is not a poem, not a law, not a work of art that does not bear the impress of these idealistic convictions. But there is nothing like that in the national life of Greece. Homer always remained the standard of Greek orthodoxy; and Homer is, essentially, a materialist. He has no recognition of spirit except as something unsubstantial, shadowy, ghost-like; according to him, the body forms the true personality of man, and even the gods are of an essentially material nature.*

Immortality is sometimes vaguely alluded to, but it is always painted as a vapid, nerveless existence, passed amid a murky twilight, almost without consciousness, dull, gloomy and repulsive in the last degree. These unspiritualistic conceptions, so diametrically opposed to the Oriental engrossment with futurity, remained characteristic of Grecian life to the end. The Greek race, as a race, never rose to any abiding faith in immortality or firm conviction of spiritual things. It was materialistic through and through. It enjoyed and glorified the present with an en-

*Nägelsbach. *Hom. Theologic.* 381, 414, etc.

chanting art; but it never ceased to look with doubt and grave misgivings upon that which lay beyond.

These, then, constitute the three essential tendencies of Hellenic life,—a proud reverence for humanity as opposed to the Oriental worship of nature, belief in moral freedom as opposed to Oriental fatalism and slavery, a materialistic clinging to the present as opposed to Oriental spiritualism and engrossment with futurity. Together, these three tendencies constitute the current on which the national life of Greece floated to its inevitable end. It remains now to show how clearly Plato stands as a protestant against this movement, as one striving not merely to reform, but to revolutionize and transform the genius of his race.

We do not mean that Plato stands alone. The followers of the Orphic rites, the Pythagoreans, the theosophists of Alexandria—all these were animated, in varying degrees, by the same spirit. But Plato stands *facile princeps*—the greatest and wisest of the protestants of Greek life, thought and religion.

To the impulse that glorified human nature, Plato opposed the principle of asceticism. The Greek ideal was that of development, the artistic culture of all human emotions and energies, the bringing forth of that divineness that lay within the nature of man. But the Platonic ideal is that of sacrifice and purification. Life, he teaches, is the entanglement of the soul within the meshes of bodily corruption; the body, instead of being the earthly type of Olympian beauty and perfection, is merely a dark prison-house in which the spirit lies bound; virtue consists not in the culture, but in the sacrifice, the crushing out of that emotional nature which is the fruit of the soul's union with the grossness of matter. It is, in a word, a true Oriental asceticism relieved of those absurd excesses of self-torture into which the fanaticism of the East is so apt to run.

Again, Plato stands steadfastly opposed to those convictions of human freedom on which Greek life reposed with so firm an assurance. He does not believe in moral freedom; the individual or national conscience, he teaches, is an unsafe guide; in the place of the moral intuitions, he would set up as a final authority the decisions of a speculative class—a sort of priesthood trained to moral and religious studies. Nor does he believe in intellectual freedom. The ordinary man he declares to be the victim of a constant delusion; only here and there is one to be found who can rise above these falsities into the region of pure

truth. Hence the mass of men should not be permitted freedom of thought: their reason should be subordinated to an implicit faith in the infallibility of their spiritual rulers. The most perfect type of intellectual life was that of Egypt, where all knowledge was made the special property of the priesthood. In the Platonic republic, the utmost uniformity of belief was to be maintained by law: heresy was to be made punishable with death; human thought was to be rigorously held in a state of true Oriental bondage. Plato was equally hostile to that political freedom in which the Greek so much delighted. In the Platonic commonwealth all individualism was to be firmly repressed: a despotism far more tyrannous than that established by the Institutes of Menu was everywhere to overshadow the private life of the citizen. No change in the established order of things was to be permitted, even in the minutest details of living. Dramatic poetry—that fruitful source of innovations and heresies—was to be rigorously excluded from the State. All individual rights were reduced to a minimum, and wherever it was possible, the strictest communism was to prevail. Property, wives and children were to be held in common, not with any licentious design, but simply because the repression of individuality—the sacrifice of all the instincts and impulses of human nature—was conceived to form the only true ideal of life.

Such is the position of Plato in regard to all those convictions of freedom—moral, intellectual, and political—which form the basis of Greek civilization. He is an absolutist of the purest Oriental type: he stands unalterably opposed to the primal traditions of his race.

Concerning the Platonic protest against the materialistic tendencies of Greece, but little need be said. It is within the school boy's knowledge that Plato was the boldest, wisest and most impassioned representative of idealism in the West. He is a spiritualist, untouched and undisturbed by the sensationalistic tendencies of the national life. He is the great classical teacher of immortality—that doctrine which Pausanias tells us was of Oriental origin and believed in only by a few of the Grecian people.* All those mystical, theosophic, impulses which are so natural to

*Pausanias. *Descriptio Græciæ*. IV., 32-34.

Eastern thought, and so alien to the genius of Greece, find shelter under the broad mantle of the Platonic philosophy.

But without dwelling upon these common-places in the history of speculation, we wish only to call attention to one fact which is not so well understood and which goes very far towards establishing the truth of our thesis. We refer to the peculiar fate which Plato's philosophy met among his countrymen.

That philosophy, if our view is the correct one, was a magnificent protest against the materialism and worldliness of Grecian life. It brought the vague abstractions of Oriental Idealism and mysticism into the clear sunlight of classical art. It clothed, in forms of matchless beauty, that sentiment of spirituality, that deep sense of sin, that hope of immortality and faith in the Infinite which Western life so strangely lacked. But Platonism—this is the pregnant fact—as a doctrine, as a philosophy, gained no firm effectual hold on Greek civilization. Its exotic conceptions took no root in the national life and bore no fruit: they did not flourish well in the unfriendly climate of Greece. Even Plato himself* seems, at times, to waver and to be inconsistent in his idealistic faith; and his disciples were still less able to resist the skeptical, materializing influences which pervaded the atmosphere of the West. Following the lead of Aristotle, they relapse more and more into those sensationalistic modes of thought which were so congenial to the Greek genius. For nearly five centuries only an occasional representative of pure Platonism made his appearance in the schools of philosophy.

But at last, after this long interval of comparative inaction, Platonism triumphed. It became the dominant philosophy. It gathered around itself all that remained of Greek culture and refinement. Note now the circumstances under which this triumph was gained.

It was a period of decay and ruin. It was a period characterized by the extinction of the spirit of liberty, by the loss of that æsthetic power which had created the poetry and art of ancient Greece, by the gradual vanishing of the noblest attribute of Hellenic genius. At that time, Alexandria became the centre of classical civilization—a city standing at the very gateway of the East, and the natural focus of the Oriental influences which just

*"Platonis Inconstantia." Cicero. *De Nat. Deorum*, I., 12.

then came pouring in on the West. Such then was the time and such the place. In a period of decadence, when the old impulses of Greek life were almost entirely exhausted, and in a city where alien Oriental influences had come pouring in like a flood, Platonism gains its triumph and becomes the dominant philosophy of the age. Could anything serve to show more clearly than this the character of the system, as a philosophy drawing its inspiration from Oriental sources and steadfastly protesting against the tendencies of pure Hellenic thought?

We believe that we have established our principle as thoroughly as these narrow limits will allow. We believe, further, that it is a principle of immense importance for the proper understanding of Greek philosophy and life. Whoever should attempt to describe the religious philosophy of the sixteenth century, would hardly begin by trying to weave together the doctrine of Luther and that of the Popes in a forced and arbitrary synthesis. No more can we proceed in that way in the study of classical thought. It is necessary to keep always in view these two movements—the one purely Greek, beginning with Homer and thence on, ruling the poetry, art, religion, and life of Greece; the other a counter-movement having its origin in the East, coming first to light in the Orphic theology, making its grandest protest in the philosophy of Plato, and ending at last in the idealism and mysticism of Alexandria. Whoever does this, will understand, as never before, the history of Hellenic civilization.
